From Atoll to Federal Agency: The Politics of Feeding People

by

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Last year at this conference I recommended that we study the contemporary Pacific in terms of the various interests of the major powers and the dependencies these interests create. My purpose was to call for a rethinking of our conventional wisdom about development assistance (Severance, 1978). I was trying then, as I am today, to play devil's advocate and suggest that certain assistance programs may have the long term effects of creating dependency and underdevelopment. These assistance programs may also control the emerging political elite.

Today, I will describe briefly the apparent effects of United States food assistance programs on a small outer island community called Piis-Losap in Truk District, Micronesia. The community is on a low coral island, one thousand feet across and three thousand feet long, set on an enclosing reef along with some other islets for the resident population of about 230 people to exploit. This is not paradise as we westerners have stereotyped Pacific atolls, but it is home; home to both the residents and to their relatives who form a dispersed squatter community on Moen, the District Center of Truk. It is a home that could probably feed the whole community if enough labor and skill were applied.

This month normally marks the opening of the breadfruit season, and taro must now be conserved. In every cookhouse, however, large pots of white rice

or a sugared flour soup are prepared and eaten with small amounts of canned mackeral or meat. Fresh bread and ship biscuits are either eaten with USDA peanut butter or dipped in sweetened coffee. The central taro patch lies dormant, and some breadfruit remains unpicked since over half the younger men are visiting or are working in Moen, or they are subsisting on basic educational opportunity grants in Hawaii or on the mainland. Those who remain on the island and subsist on a combination of local, purchased and free government food are primarily the very young and the very old.

It is tempting to think of this island as a self-reliant community which could survive if shipping were cut off. Micronesian atolls face occasional resource fluctuation due to typhoons which may simply damage the breadfruit crop or may be devastating. With the exception of true isolates (Alkire, 1978) whose populations seem to level out below carrying capacity, most atoll communities have survived such "disaster" in the past by maximizing their social and economic ties to neighboring islands so that food can be moved to people and people can be moved to food.

The high population density of the island I describe (2000+ sq. mi.) is due to its closeness to the high island complex of Truk and the fact that Truk's resources may legitimately be considered part of Piis-Losap's ecosystem. After the 1907 typhoon canoeloads of fermented breadfruit were sent out from Truk. After recent typhoons, including Pamela in 1976, shiploads of USDA food have eventually arrived. The canoe response time in getting local food to the atoll seems often to have been quicker than the response time for ship-transported government food, and now they have outboard motorboats for even faster shipment of larger quantities of local foods, although the total volume of food is still greater when the ship comes in.

People living here have always been pragmatic and have readily adopted

new customs and new technologies. Their response to the federal feeding programs has been to view them realistically as a new resource to be exploited. We, and they, may therefore ask whether such programs will continue to be available to feed a now rapidly expanding population, or whether they are temporary inputs on which the people are already too dependent.

There are three major programs which have reached the atoll: the school lunch program, various increments of typhoon relief food, and the needy families feeding program. Unlike the elderly nutrition program which made an abortive attempt to utilize local foods in Truk lagoon (Borthwick, 1978), these programs provide the standard USDA surplus commodities. The school lunch program, begun in the nineteen sixties, has additional support for school cooks' salaries from DHEW Title III funds. It usually provides a noon meal for elementary students on days when school is in session. Occasionally, a small amount of the leftovers on students' plates reaches family members, a traditional and adaptive pattern. I believe that this program may well have the side effect of reducing the need for local food production among those family units that continue to have a good balance of younger male and female labor as well as among those family units which now face labor shortages.

Typhoon relief food is distributed to the various islands on the basis of population size and varying damage estimates. The food is presumed to allow the population to remain at home and to rebuild more quickly. Studies of other islands indicate that such aid can speed the rebuilding process if the aid is immediately forthcoming and if it is adjusted to a realistic assessment of needs that includes adequate communication from the local community (Marshall, 1976; Brady, 1978). Naturally, each island in a damaged area is in political competition with other islands for its share of the overall relief pie. Indeed, the size of the relief obtained (usually counted in numbers

of bags of rice and flour) seems to have become a measure of the political effectiveness of individual leaders or brokers at the island and district levels.

One impact of the typhoon relief and needy families food on the island community I have described, and perhaps on other communities as well, has been a reduction in the degree of solidarity and sharing of both labor and resources between members of the traditional, descent-based, land-holding groups (Severance, 1976; Borthwick, 1977). Typhoon relief food was originally divided equally among such groups in a manner similar to feast contributions. Since 1970, however, the food has been divided equally among household heads who no longer need to submit to the authority of elders in their land-holding group. These elders traditionally managed the group resources for all by regulating consumption.

It is worth asking whether subsistence production of local foods has actually declined with the fairly regular increments of typhoon relief food. One observer has argued that "disaster welfare frequently acts, itself, as an agent of disaster by nurturing long term risks through short term remedies" (Torry, 1978). In ecological jargon this is gaining stability at the expense of resiliency.

The new needy families feeding program is much more easily questioned because of its size and political implications (Latham, 1973). This program began last October in Truk only (although Ponape has petitioned for it) and is supposed to end in September. All families qualify on the basis of mainland guidelines for case income and, to my knowledge, no attempt was made by those in the district government who requested the program to estimate the value of subsistence production as a part of family income. Each family (averaging seven persons) is receiving two and one-half tons of food for the

year. It is widely recognized in development circles that food aid can operate as a disincentive to self-reliant development (Isenman & Singer, 1977). A justification for such programs is that they may temporarily free capital used for import consumption so that it may be applied to local investment in development. Justifications for the needy families program in Truk seem to include the freeing of family cash supplies and the provisioning of the outer island communities so that net inmigration to Moen would be reduced.

Report of a survey done by Xavier High School students on Moen indicates that some of the freed cash is spent on meat supplements and some on luxury items. Contrary to statements by those who support the program, the report indicates that subsistence production in fishing has drastically declined (Kiste, n.d.).

The nutritional impact of these programs is difficult to assess although rates of reporting of infant malnutrition in Truk Lagoon are increasing. Ironically, Ambassador Rosenblatt's recent statement that it was basically a United States decision not to commence any new federal programs may have taken some pressure off those politicians in Truk who do not favor the needy families program (Rosenblatt, n.d.). Continuation of the program was an issue in the recent election in Truk. A resolution by the Congress of Micronesia (and the Congress of the Federated States) effectively states that federal programs should support the goals of self sufficiency proposed in the UNDP Indicative Development Plan, while an ensuing resolution by the Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia states that these programs should even be frozen.

Yet, it is significant that the government of the most densely populated district has been able to obtain the needy families program, an obviously

popular program that has gained its proponents some political clout. If termination of the trusteeship will mean that block grants will be divided by the Congress of the Federated States so that each district government can then purchase the particular federal programs it "needs" then such a dependency generating program may be a dangerous precedent.

We observers and the Trukese may question whether the United States grant monies might have a greater return in the long run if they are spent on something other than surplus food. The decisions to implement the needy families program were made at various levels in a multicultural bureaucratic hierarchy. Although it is easy to stereotype bureaucratic hierarchies, anthropological studies of them suggest that they are quite variable. The flow of information and resources as well as the decision-making process may vary from level to level, as well as between bureaucracies (Arensberg, 1978; Whyte, 1978; Wallace, 1976).

In order to gain more complete understanding of the impact of United States policy (Ilon, 1978) on local communities, we need to examine carefully the linkages between the municipal and district governments and the Congress of the Federated States of Micronesia. Linkages between these levels and regional and Washington offices must also be considered along with a cultural understanding of the way individual actors perceive each other and each others' needs. This can be done by a methodology that Laura Nader has called "studying up" by means of a "vertical slice". Obviously, a better understanding of policy impact and policy implementation can only come from detailed study of the flow of both information and resources up and down.

If members of this small atoll community truly have come to depend on and trust in continuing access to USDA food in the same way that they have always had access to the surplus subsistence resources of Truk, their local

needs must be adequately communicable to the top. However, these needs must also not conflict with any perceived needs of competing federal agencies. In addition, requirements of various agencies should be mutually adjusted so that the needs of local communities at the bottom are given fair consideration.

At a time when self-reliant development and eco-development are becoming the new buzzwords, I suggest that programs which improve local agricultural and fisheries productivity may provide greater long term adaptability for atoll communities than temporary and massive inputs of surplus food. The choice of assistance programs should be left to the Trukese. The politics of such choice become more difficult when free food distribution provides power and votes to local politicians.

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